

How Adaptive Leadership Shapes Organizational Resilience During Strategic Change: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Citation: Zand, S. (2025). How Adaptive Leadership Shapes Organizational Resilience During Strategic Change: A Qualitative Inquiry. *Multidisciplinary Engineering Science Open*, 2, 1-15.

Abstract

This study aimed to explore how adaptive leadership shapes organizational resilience during strategic change in organizations operating in Tehran. This qualitative inquiry was conducted using an interpretive research design. Participants included 24 senior managers, middle managers, project leaders, and organizational development specialists from Tehran-based organizations that had recently experienced strategic change, including restructuring, digital transformation, market repositioning, or process redesign. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling, based on direct experience with leadership and change implementation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 75 minutes. Theoretical saturation was achieved after the twenty-first interview, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the adequacy and stability of the emerging categories. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and retrieve supporting quotations. Analysis revealed four main categories explaining how adaptive leadership contributed to organizational resilience during strategic change: diagnostic sensemaking and reframing of change, participatory mobilization and psychological safety, flexible resource reconfiguration, and learning institutionalization. Participants described adaptive leaders as individuals who reduced ambiguity, challenged rigid assumptions, created space for dialogue, redistributed authority, protected employees from emotional overload, and converted disruption into collective learning. These mechanisms strengthened resilience by enabling organizations to absorb uncertainty, maintain operational continuity, adapt routines, and transform experience into durable organizational capability. The findings suggest that adaptive leadership shapes organizational resilience not through command-and-control responses, but through continuous diagnosis, inclusive mobilization, behavioral flexibility, and embedded learning. During strategic change, resilient organizations appear to depend on leaders who can regulate anxiety, preserve meaning, encourage experimentation, and align short-term adaptation with long-term strategic renewal.

Keywords: adaptive leadership; organizational resilience; strategic change; qualitative inquiry; thematic analysis; Tehran; organizational adaptation.

1. Introduction

Strategic change has become a persistent organizational condition rather than an occasional managerial project. Organizations increasingly face technological disruption, market volatility, institutional pressure, workforce transformation, geopolitical uncertainty, and shifting stakeholder expectations. Under such conditions, strategic change is rarely limited to a formal plan, revised structure, or new performance target. It often requires organizations to reinterpret their environment, revise established routines, redistribute authority, and sustain collective functioning while the assumptions underlying previous success are being questioned. Although strategic change has traditionally been examined through planned change models, implementation frameworks, and change-readiness perspectives, recent organizational scholarship has increasingly emphasized uncertainty, emergence, learning, and adaptation as central elements of change processes (Burnes, 2004; By, 2005; Oreg et al., 2011; Weick & Quinn, 1999). This shift is especially important because strategic change does not merely test whether organizations can implement a new direction; it tests whether they can remain resilient while their identity, capabilities, and operating logic are under pressure.

Organizational resilience refers to the capacity of an organization to anticipate, absorb, respond to, recover from, and adapt to disruptive conditions while preserving or renewing core functions. Early resilience discussions often focused on crisis, reliability, or recovery from adverse events, but contemporary organizational research conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic capability that emerges through processes of anticipation, coping, adaptation, and learning (Boin & van Eeten, 2013; Ducheck, 2020; Linnenluecke, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). From this perspective, resilience is not simply the ability to return to a prior state after disruption. Rather, it includes the capacity to maintain continuity while also transforming practices when existing routines are no longer sufficient. Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011) argue that resilience depends on organizational capacities that are built through human resource systems, cognitive readiness, behavioral flexibility, and relational resources. Similarly, Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) describe resilience as a positive organizational capability grounded in mindful action, learning, and relational competence. These perspectives indicate that resilience is not located only in formal structures or contingency plans; it is also embedded in patterns of leadership, communication, interpretation, and collective action.

The relationship between strategic change and organizational resilience is particularly significant because change often produces the very disruptions that resilience is expected to manage. Strategic change may generate ambiguity about priorities, conflict over resource allocation, resistance among employees, overload in middle management, temporary performance decline, and uncertainty about organizational identity. Change recipients' responses are shaped by trust, perceived fairness, participation, communication, and beliefs about the need and consequences of change (Oreg et al., 2011). When these social and



cognitive conditions are neglected, strategic change can weaken resilience by increasing fragmentation, defensive behavior, and withdrawal. Conversely, when change is guided through processes that support sensemaking, participation, learning, and adaptive coordination, strategic change may become a source of resilience-building rather than merely a threat to stability. Therefore, the leadership of strategic change must be understood not only as a matter of vision-setting and implementation, but also as a resilience-shaping process.

Adaptive leadership offers a useful theoretical lens for understanding this process. Heifetz (1994) distinguishes technical problems, which can be solved through existing expertise and procedures, from adaptive challenges, which require people to revise values, assumptions, relationships, and habits. Strategic change frequently contains both technical and adaptive elements. A new digital platform, for example, may require technical training, but it may also challenge professional identities, decision rights, power relations, and long-established interpretations of competence. Adaptive leadership is therefore concerned with mobilizing people to confront difficult realities, regulate distress, experiment with new responses, and develop the capacity to solve problems that cannot be resolved through authority alone (Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). This emphasis is especially relevant during strategic change because the leader's task is not merely to provide answers, but to create conditions in which the organization can learn its way through uncertainty.

Adaptive leadership differs from leadership approaches that primarily emphasize charisma, control, or top-down direction. While strategic vision remains important, adaptive leadership emphasizes diagnosis, disciplined attention, productive conflict, distributed responsibility, and holding environments in which people can engage with uncertainty without becoming overwhelmed (Heifetz et al., 2009). Yukl and Mahsud (2010) similarly argue that flexible and adaptive leadership is essential in contemporary organizations because leaders must adjust behavior to shifting demands, competing priorities, and emerging threats. Complexity leadership theory also supports this view by suggesting that adaptive outcomes emerge from interaction, experimentation, and enabling conditions rather than from hierarchical command alone (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). These perspectives position leadership as a dynamic and relational process that shapes how organizations interpret disruption, coordinate action, and transform experience into capability.

A central mechanism linking adaptive leadership and resilience is sensemaking. During strategic change, organizational members often confront inconsistent signals, incomplete information, and uncertain implications for their roles. Sensemaking helps people transform ambiguous circumstances into a situation that can be discussed and acted upon (Weick et al., 2005). Leaders influence resilience by shaping whether ambiguity becomes paralysis, denial, conflict, or learning. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) show that crises and change events require ongoing sensemaking because people must interpret what is happening, what it means, and what action is possible. Adaptive leaders contribute to resilience by reframing strategic

change as a shared adaptive challenge, making hidden tensions discussable, and helping members distinguish between what must be preserved and what must be changed. In this way, leadership shapes the interpretive foundations of resilience.

Another mechanism is psychological safety and participation. Strategic change often requires employees to speak about errors, question assumptions, propose alternatives, and experiment with unfamiliar practices. These behaviors are unlikely to occur in environments where people fear blame, humiliation, or punishment. Edmondson (1999) introduced psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, and later research has linked psychological safety to learning, innovation, and performance in uncertain contexts (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Adaptive leadership can strengthen resilience by creating conditions in which employees can voice concerns, disclose operational weaknesses, challenge unrealistic plans, and contribute local knowledge. Such participation is not merely democratic symbolism; it provides the organization with distributed intelligence needed to detect weak signals, adjust implementation, and prevent strategic blind spots.

Adaptive leadership may also shape resilience through resource reconfiguration. Dynamic capabilities theory argues that organizations must integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). During strategic change, resilience depends not only on morale or commitment but also on the practical ability to redeploy people, redesign workflows, modify routines, and combine existing capabilities in new ways. Adaptive leaders facilitate such reconfiguration by loosening rigid boundaries, encouraging cross-functional collaboration, prioritizing resources according to emerging realities, and legitimizing experimentation. This is consistent with resilience research suggesting that organizations become resilient when they develop behavioral variety, relational coordination, and flexible action repertoires (Duchek, 2020; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Despite growing interest in adaptive leadership and organizational resilience, empirical understanding of how adaptive leadership shapes resilience during strategic change remains limited. Much of the leadership literature examines leader traits, styles, or effectiveness outcomes, while resilience research often focuses on crisis response, disaster recovery, or structural preparedness. Less attention has been given to the lived experiences of managers and organizational members who navigate strategic change in real organizational settings. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for this topic because it allows researchers to examine meaning-making, relational dynamics, leadership practices, and context-specific mechanisms that may not be captured through standardized instruments. Moreover, organizations in Tehran operate within a complex economic, institutional, and social environment, where uncertainty, resource constraints, regulatory shifts, and competitive pressure may intensify the need for adaptive leadership and resilience. Studying this context can contribute to a richer understanding of how resilience is constructed through leadership practice in environments characterized by strategic turbulence.



Accordingly, the aim of this study was to explore how adaptive leadership shapes organizational resilience during strategic change among Tehran-based organizations.

2. Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study used a qualitative research design with an interpretive orientation to explore how adaptive leadership shapes organizational resilience during strategic change. A qualitative approach was selected because the purpose of the study was not to test predetermined hypotheses, but to understand participants' experiences, interpretations, and meanings regarding leadership behavior, organizational adaptation, and resilience during strategic transformation. The study focused on organizations located in Tehran that had experienced significant strategic change within the previous three years, including digital transformation, organizational restructuring, process redesign, market repositioning, merger-related integration, or major changes in business model and service delivery.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because direct experience with strategic change and leadership processes was required. Snowball sampling was also used after initial interviews, as participants introduced other knowledgeable individuals who had participated in strategic change processes. The final sample consisted of 24 participants from Tehran-based organizations. Participants included senior managers, middle managers, project leaders, human resource managers, organizational development specialists, and senior experts who had been directly involved in planning, implementing, or experiencing strategic change. Inclusion criteria were at least five years of professional work experience, at least one year of employment in the current organization, direct exposure to a strategic change initiative, and willingness to participate in a recorded interview. Individuals who had only indirect or superficial knowledge of the change process were excluded.

The sample included 14 men and 10 women. In terms of age, 5 participants were between 30 and 35 years old, 9 were between 36 and 45 years old, 7 were between 46 and 55 years old, and 3 were older than 55 years. Regarding organizational position, 6 participants were senior managers, 8 were middle managers, 4 were project or change leaders, 3 were human resource or organizational development specialists, and 3 were senior professional experts. In terms of education, 4 participants held a bachelor's degree, 16 held a master's degree, and 4 held a doctoral degree. Participants represented organizations in technology and digital services, banking and finance, manufacturing, healthcare services, education, and professional consulting. This diversity was intended to capture a broad range of strategic change experiences while maintaining the shared contextual focus on Tehran-based organizations.

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allowed the researcher to explore common topics across participants while also permitting flexibility to follow emerging issues, clarify meanings, and examine context-specific experiences in depth. An interview guide was developed based on

the literature on adaptive leadership, organizational resilience, strategic change, sensemaking, psychological safety, and dynamic capabilities. The guide included open-ended questions such as: “Can you describe a strategic change your organization experienced?”, “How did leaders respond when uncertainty or resistance emerged?”, “What leadership behaviors helped the organization remain functional during the change?”, “How were employees involved in interpreting or solving change-related problems?”, “What helped the organization learn from disruption?”, and “What leadership practices weakened or strengthened resilience?”

Before beginning each interview, participants were informed about the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the use of anonymized quotations in reporting. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and private setting or through secure online communication, depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. With participant permission, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations, preliminary analytic impressions, nonverbal cues, and emerging conceptual insights. These notes were not treated as primary data but were used to support reflexive analysis.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was considered reached when additional interviews no longer produced substantially new codes, properties, or relationships among categories. In this study, theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the adequacy, consistency, and explanatory scope of the emerging categories. These final interviews supported the stability of the analysis and did not require the addition of a new main category.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed an iterative process involving familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analytic narrative, consistent with the thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). NVivo software was used to organize interview transcripts, manage the coding process, retrieve relevant excerpts, compare codes across participants, and develop category structures. The use of NVivo supported systematic data management but did not replace interpretive analysis; themes were developed through repeated reading, comparison, reflection, and conceptual refinement.

The first stage of analysis involved reading each transcript several times to gain an overall understanding of participants’ experiences. Initial notes were written to capture recurring ideas, significant phrases, tensions, and leadership practices associated with resilience. In the second stage, open coding was conducted line by line. Codes were assigned to meaningful segments of text related to leadership behaviors, emotional responses, communication patterns, decision-making processes, resource allocation, employee participation, learning,



and continuity during change. Examples of initial codes included “naming the real problem,” “reducing fear through explanation,” “inviting disagreement,” “protecting core operations,” “temporary redistribution of authority,” “cross-functional problem solving,” “learning from failure,” and “turning crisis into new routine.”

In the third stage, related codes were compared and grouped into subcategories. Constant comparison was used to examine similarities and differences across participants, organizational levels, and types of strategic change. Subcategories were then organized into broader categories that captured the main mechanisms through which adaptive leadership shaped organizational resilience. The final analysis produced four main categories: diagnostic sensemaking and reframing of change, participatory mobilization and psychological safety, flexible resource reconfiguration, and learning institutionalization. To enhance credibility, selected participants reviewed brief summaries of the emerging findings and confirmed that the categories reflected their experiences. Peer debriefing was also used to discuss coding decisions and reduce individual interpretive bias. Dependability was supported through maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, analytic memos, category revisions, and theme definitions. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memo-writing and the use of direct participant quotations to link interpretations to the data.

Findings

The demographic profile of the participants showed that the study included 24 organizational members with direct experience of strategic change in Tehran-based organizations. Fourteen participants were male and 10 were female. Five participants were aged 30–35 years, 9 were aged 36–45 years, 7 were aged 46–55 years, and 3 were older than 55 years. Regarding organizational role, 6 participants were senior managers, 8 were middle managers, 4 were project or change leaders, 3 were human resource or organizational development specialists, and 3 were senior experts. In terms of educational attainment, 4 participants held bachelor's degrees, 16 held master's degrees, and 4 held doctoral degrees. Participants came from technology and digital services, banking and finance, manufacturing, healthcare services, education, and consulting organizations. Their work experience ranged from 6 to 28 years, with an average professional experience of approximately 14 years. This demographic diversity allowed the study to capture different perspectives on adaptive leadership and resilience across hierarchical levels, functional roles, and organizational sectors.

Diagnostic sensemaking and reframing of change. The first main category showed that adaptive leadership shaped organizational resilience by helping members understand the nature of strategic change and reinterpret disruption as an adaptive challenge rather than a temporary managerial disturbance. Participants repeatedly stated that resilient responses began when leaders were able to diagnose the real problem, clarify why change was necessary, and distinguish between technical issues and deeper adaptive tensions. In several organizations, initial resistance was intensified because employees perceived change as

another imposed managerial program. Adaptive leaders reduced this resistance by explaining environmental pressures, admitting uncertainty, and inviting employees to examine outdated assumptions. One participant stated, “Our director did not begin by saying, ‘This is the new plan and you must follow it.’ He said, ‘The market has changed, our old logic is not enough, and we need to understand together what must be protected and what must change’” (P07). Another participant explained, “When the leader named the problem honestly, people stopped guessing. The stress did not disappear, but it became manageable because we understood what we were facing” (P13). This category included the subcategories of environmental scanning, honest communication, reframing uncertainty, distinguishing technical from adaptive problems, and preserving strategic meaning. Participants emphasized that leaders who avoided reality, exaggerated certainty, or reduced strategic change to procedural compliance weakened resilience because employees remained confused and defensive. In contrast, leaders who framed change as collective learning strengthened resilience by creating a shared interpretive foundation for action.

Participatory mobilization and psychological safety. The second main category indicated that adaptive leadership strengthened resilience by mobilizing employees across organizational levels and creating psychological safety for voice, disagreement, and experimentation. Participants described resilient organizations as those in which leaders did not centralize all decisions during uncertainty. Instead, they involved middle managers and frontline employees who possessed practical knowledge about customers, processes, technologies, and operational constraints. Participation was particularly important because many strategic plans had to be modified during implementation. One participant noted, “The formal strategy was written at the top, but the real adaptation happened in weekly meetings where people from operations, sales, IT, and HR could say what was not working” (P04). Another participant stated, “Our manager allowed us to criticize the plan without being labeled negative. That changed everything because people started reporting problems early instead of hiding them” (P18). This category included the subcategories of shared decision-making, employee voice, safe disagreement, cross-level dialogue, and distributed ownership. Participants emphasized that psychological safety did not mean the absence of pressure or accountability. Rather, it meant that employees could speak honestly about risks, failures, and unrealistic expectations. Leaders who punished bad news, ignored local knowledge, or treated resistance as disloyalty reduced resilience by creating silence and symbolic compliance. By contrast, adaptive leaders increased resilience by turning resistance into information, disagreement into diagnosis, and participation into commitment.

Flexible resource reconfiguration. The third main category reflected the role of adaptive leadership in helping organizations reconfigure resources, routines, and responsibilities during strategic change. Participants explained that resilience depended on the ability to maintain essential operations while reallocating people, time, budgets, technologies, and decision rights to meet new strategic demands. Adaptive leaders were described as flexible



but not chaotic: they adjusted priorities, suspended nonessential routines, formed temporary cross-functional teams, and redirected resources toward urgent learning and implementation needs. One participant explained, “During the digital transformation, the leader temporarily moved two experienced people from routine reporting to process redesign. It created pressure, but it helped us solve a problem that had blocked the whole project” (P11). Another participant observed, “The important thing was that roles were not treated as fixed boxes. When the situation changed, responsibilities changed, and the leader explained why” (P22). This category included the subcategories of role flexibility, cross-functional coordination, rapid resource redeployment, protection of core functions, and adaptive prioritization. Participants also highlighted the importance of balancing stability and flexibility. Leaders who changed priorities too frequently created confusion, whereas leaders who refused to revise routines created rigidity. Adaptive leadership contributed to resilience when leaders protected essential organizational functions while simultaneously allowing enough flexibility for experimentation, improvisation, and timely adjustment.

Learning institutionalization. The fourth main category showed that adaptive leadership shaped resilience by converting the experience of strategic change into organizational learning. Participants emphasized that some organizations survived change episodes but failed to learn from them, leading to repeated errors in later initiatives. In contrast, adaptive leaders deliberately created mechanisms for reflection, documentation, feedback, and integration of lessons into future routines. One participant stated, “After each phase, our leader asked three questions: What did we assume? What happened? What should we change before the next phase? These meetings prevented us from repeating the same mistake” (P02). Another participant explained, “The change became less frightening when people saw that mistakes were not only punished; they were analyzed and turned into better processes” (P16). This category included the subcategories of reflective practice, after-action review, learning from failure, codifying new routines, and building future readiness. Participants described adaptive leaders as individuals who maintained attention after the immediate pressure decreased. Rather than declaring success too early, they encouraged teams to consolidate new practices, revise procedures, update training, and preserve relational networks developed during the change. This process strengthened resilience because the organization did not merely recover from disruption; it expanded its capacity to respond to future uncertainty.

Discussion

This study explored how adaptive leadership shapes organizational resilience during strategic change among Tehran-based organizations. The findings revealed four main categories: diagnostic sensemaking and reframing of change, participatory mobilization and psychological safety, flexible resource reconfiguration, and learning institutionalization. Together, these categories suggest that adaptive leadership contributes to resilience by shaping how organizations interpret disruption, mobilize distributed knowledge, modify routines, and convert experience into durable capability. The findings support the view that

organizational resilience is not a static trait or a simple recovery outcome, but a dynamic and socially constructed capability that develops through cognitive, relational, behavioral, and learning processes (Duchek, 2020; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Linnenluecke, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). The results also extend adaptive leadership theory by showing how adaptive leadership practices become resilience mechanisms during strategic change.

The first category, diagnostic sensemaking and reframing of change, indicates that adaptive leaders strengthen resilience by helping organizational members understand what kind of challenge they are facing and why established routines may no longer be sufficient. This finding is consistent with Heifetz's distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges, because participants described strategic change as requiring not only new procedures but also new assumptions, priorities, and relationships (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009). The finding also aligns with sensemaking theory, which emphasizes that people need to transform ambiguous conditions into shared meanings that can guide action (Weick et al., 2005). During strategic change, uncertainty can easily produce rumors, fear, and defensive behavior. The study showed that leaders who honestly named environmental pressures and clarified the adaptive nature of change helped employees move from confusion to engagement. This supports Maitlis and Sonenshein's (2010) argument that sensemaking is central in crisis and change because people must interpret disruption before they can act coherently. In resilience terms, diagnostic sensemaking supports anticipatory and coping capacities by enabling the organization to detect threats, recognize outdated assumptions, and create a shared basis for coordinated response (Duchek, 2020).

The second category, participatory mobilization and psychological safety, shows that adaptive leadership shapes resilience by distributing responsibility and creating conditions for voice. Participants emphasized that resilience improved when leaders invited disagreement, encouraged early reporting of problems, and treated employee resistance as useful information rather than disobedience. This finding is strongly aligned with Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety as a condition for learning behavior in teams. Strategic change often reveals implementation gaps that are visible to frontline employees before they are visible to senior leaders. If employees fear blame, they may hide problems until they become crises. Adaptive leaders therefore strengthen resilience by making it safe to communicate weak signals, question assumptions, and propose alternatives. This also supports Edmondson and Lei's (2014) broader conclusion that psychological safety is important for learning in uncertain and interdependent work contexts. From the perspective of adaptive leadership, participation is not merely a motivational technique; it is a mechanism for mobilizing collective intelligence (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). From the perspective of resilience, participation expands the organization's capacity to notice, interpret, and respond to disruption through multiple sources of knowledge (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007).



The third category, flexible resource reconfiguration, indicates that adaptive leadership contributes to resilience by enabling organizations to modify roles, routines, resource allocation, and coordination patterns during strategic change. This finding is consistent with dynamic capabilities theory, which argues that organizations must integrate, build, and reconfigure competences in response to changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). Participants did not define resilience as passive endurance. Instead, they associated resilience with the ability to protect essential operations while redesigning work processes, reallocating personnel, and forming temporary cross-functional structures. This finding also supports Yukl and Mahsud's (2010) argument that flexible and adaptive leadership is essential because leaders must adjust behavior to changing conditions, competing demands, and emerging problems. However, the findings also show that flexibility must be disciplined. Participants criticized leaders who changed priorities too frequently or created ambiguity through unstable decisions. Thus, adaptive leadership appears to shape resilience through a balance between stability and change. This is consistent with organizational resilience literature emphasizing that resilient organizations must simultaneously maintain core functioning and adapt to new conditions (Boin & van Eeten, 2013; Ducheck, 2020; Williams et al., 2017).

The fourth category, learning institutionalization, demonstrates that adaptive leadership strengthens resilience by converting strategic change experiences into organizational learning. Participants distinguished between organizations that merely survived change and organizations that learned from it. Adaptive leaders supported resilience by facilitating reflection, after-action review, documentation, feedback, and codification of new routines. This finding is consistent with Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003), who link resilience to learning-oriented organizing, and with Vogus and Sutcliffe (2007), who argue that resilience develops through ongoing collective processes rather than one-time responses. It also aligns with Ducheck's (2020) capability-based view, in which resilience includes anticipation, coping, and adaptation. Learning institutionalization is particularly important because it connects immediate adaptation to future readiness. Strategic change can produce valuable knowledge, but this knowledge may remain fragmented unless leaders create processes for reflection and integration. The findings suggest that adaptive leadership prevents organizational learning loss by ensuring that lessons from disruption become part of future routines, training, communication practices, and decision-making systems.

Overall, the findings suggest that adaptive leadership shapes organizational resilience through a sequence of mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Diagnostic sensemaking helps members understand the change challenge; participatory mobilization activates distributed knowledge; flexible resource reconfiguration enables practical adaptation; and learning institutionalization transforms experience into future capability. This sequence is not strictly linear, because organizations may move back and forth among interpretation, participation, action, and learning. Nevertheless, the four categories provide an integrated explanation of how adaptive leadership operates during strategic change. The findings support complexity

leadership theory by showing that adaptive outcomes emerge not only from formal authority but from enabling interactions, cross-level dialogue, experimentation, and distributed problem-solving (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). They also contribute to change management literature by shifting attention from implementation compliance to resilience-building. Strategic change is more likely to succeed when leadership practices increase the organization's ability to absorb uncertainty, adjust behavior, and learn continuously.

The findings also have contextual relevance for Tehran-based organizations. Participants described strategic change in environments marked by economic uncertainty, resource limitations, regulatory complexity, technological pressure, and competitive instability. In such contexts, leadership approaches based solely on prediction, control, and formal planning may be insufficient. Adaptive leadership becomes important because it helps organizations work with uncertainty rather than deny it. The study suggests that resilience in such environments depends on leaders who can maintain strategic direction without pretending to possess complete certainty. This ability to combine honesty, participation, flexibility, and learning may be especially important in contexts where external volatility increases the risk of employee anxiety, defensive routines, and short-term decision-making. Therefore, adaptive leadership may be particularly valuable for organizations operating under persistent environmental turbulence.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by connecting adaptive leadership and organizational resilience within the specific context of strategic change. While adaptive leadership theory explains how leaders mobilize people to address adaptive challenges, and resilience theory explains how organizations respond to disruption, the present findings show how these two domains intersect. Adaptive leadership appears to shape resilience by influencing the interpretive, relational, operational, and learning conditions of strategic change. This suggests that organizational resilience should not be treated only as an outcome of structures, resources, or prior preparedness. It should also be understood as a leadership-mediated capability that is continuously constructed through everyday practices of communication, participation, prioritization, and reflection. The study also suggests that adaptive leadership is not merely a personal leadership style; it is a set of organizational practices that can be distributed across levels, especially when middle managers and frontline experts are authorized to diagnose problems and contribute to adaptation.

From a practical standpoint, the results indicate that organizations undergoing strategic change should develop leadership capacities that go beyond planning, persuasion, and performance monitoring. Leaders need skills in diagnostic inquiry, emotional regulation, participatory facilitation, conflict management, resource reconfiguration, and learning design. These skills are essential because resilience depends on whether employees can interpret change, speak honestly, coordinate flexibly, and learn from implementation experience. Organizations should therefore evaluate leaders not only by whether they deliver change milestones, but also by whether they build the adaptive capacity of the system. Strategic



change initiatives may fail when leaders overemphasize urgency without creating meaning, demand commitment without enabling voice, require flexibility without protecting core functions, or celebrate success without institutionalizing learning.

Conclusion

This qualitative inquiry explored how adaptive leadership shapes organizational resilience during strategic change in Tehran-based organizations. The findings revealed that adaptive leadership contributes to resilience through four interrelated mechanisms: diagnostic sensemaking and reframing of change, participatory mobilization and psychological safety, flexible resource reconfiguration, and learning institutionalization. These mechanisms show that resilience is not only a structural or procedural capacity, but also a leadership-mediated process that depends on how people interpret uncertainty, communicate across levels, adjust routines, and learn from disruption.

The study suggests that adaptive leaders strengthen resilience by helping organizational members confront reality without becoming overwhelmed by it. They clarify the meaning of strategic change, create safe spaces for dialogue, use distributed knowledge, reconfigure resources according to emerging needs, and transform experience into future readiness. In this sense, adaptive leadership does not eliminate uncertainty; rather, it enables organizations to work productively within uncertainty. Strategic change becomes less damaging when leaders regulate anxiety, mobilize participation, preserve essential functions, and support experimentation.

The findings contribute to leadership, change management, and resilience scholarship by demonstrating how adaptive leadership operates as a practical pathway through which organizations develop resilience during strategic transformation. For practitioners, the study highlights the importance of developing leaders who can combine direction with humility, authority with participation, and stability with flexibility. Organizations that invest in adaptive leadership capacity may be better prepared not only to survive strategic change, but also to learn from it and emerge with stronger resilience for future disruption.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

Acknowledgments

Authors thank all who helped us through this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding/Financial Support

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

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